

Songs My Mother Taught Me



Halvard Johnson

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by Halvard Johnson

gradient books

for Lynda and a few friends

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Momma Loved Warhol

Riding the rails northward along the Hudson, somnolence swept away her tears. Newburgh, without its bridge in those days, enabled some thoughts of my birth. Poughkeepsie, where grandpa got off for his annual visit—sometimes one month, sometimes more.

Same driver both ways. Red Apple Rest open for business, enabling alert driving except while asleep. The wiseguy in the shirt speculated about enabling the British to sale northward as far as Albany. When traveling that way, we always stopped in to say hello to mom and dad.

Revision subsystem 3: always a challenge to boot up, to ice in on those bad days February almost always brings. If we stipulate, among other things, that China honor the Berne Convention, things should improve for all of us. You showed them a way out of relying so heavily on the arms trade.

Timeslice cutoffs never ceased to amaze us, until push came to shovel and brief alliances showed us the way to come to grips with our failure to make sense of things such as solar flares, migraines, etc. The beautiful miller's

daughter impeded our progress, but only somewhat.
Unreported income spelled trouble.

Hyperallergens all around, says the guy at the bar, and
we all raise our glasses to cheer. When I sneeze,
everybody sneezes. When I pay . . . well, never mind.
The same way you looked in your rearview mirror,
saw nothing behind you, and then kerblam! You were
splashed all over the place.

Nothing more debased, momma said, than those who just
use money to make more money. Andy, she said, turned
money into art, into movies, into fun. And, yes, he
sometimes sucked it up his nose. Or so she'd heard,
she thought. Elements of design came to the fore
just minutes before World War I.

Neutrality shrivels upon the vine, as we go hodge-
podging along in our accustomed way. History, whatever
that was, told momma little of value about herself
as the rowboat carried her away from her flooded house,
the sounds of empires collapsing all around her,
without a prayer to pray.

Momma told Warhol, "You know, Andy, maybe you
could try to be a little . . . well, a little less Pittsburgh, if you
get my meaning." Warhol stared blankly. Momma loved

Warhol, but was on shaky ground with him—always,
lucky he'd never heard her say, "Pop Art is to Art as
Pop Tarts are to Real Food."

Processes of dissociation not unknown to us back in the day, although trepidations
often ran away with us (or some of us). Cypressess along the inside of the wall. Gardens
on private side only. Terrorism kept at bay. Back on solid
ground, running historians out of town. It was a wrap.
Kudos to all involved.

Trades of the Tool

Fortliness is next to portliness, my mother always used to say. Mixing, as always, one thing with another up, speaking sideways through both sides

of her mouths. She mocked my father for his propensity to always choose the wrong tool for the right (and sometimes wrong) job. Neither of them

enjoyed anything much more than catching the other in some error, some lapse of judgment that they could rag each other about until hello froze entirely over.

The Mind at the Top of the Palm

I'm telling you we need these folks, the ones who
speculate in unrehearsed markets, the ones no one

ever suspects of underhanded dealings, the ones
who have nothing to lose but loss itself.

I'm telling you now that nothing we've ever thought
to be true really was, that in the beginning was the word,

and that the word was "Fuck!" I'm telling you now
that the only way coconuts fall is down, the same

way fire-fangled feathers dangle.

Devout Stipulations

No, no, no, not those ones—these ones:
that those who don't teach do
that government is by, for, and fuck the people
that a penny saved is a penny earmarked for bank fees
that a journey of a thousand miles begins by mortgaging the house
to buy a ticket (plus baggage-handling fees and travel to and from airport)
that differences are to similarities as apples are to oranges
that that makes any difference to any of us now

Effects of El Niño Events on Traditional Marriage Vows

Totally out of cutthroat finches, the stores of our town closed
their doors. You showed them the way to go home.
Insipidity, the flavor of the day.

The shell, a mere by-product, held to the ear, makes ocean
soundings.

Answers to Several As Yet Unasked Questions

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time, didn't it?

*

On a certain Sunday afternoon, late in May, I think it was, but I might be wrong about that. Hard to believe, I know.

*

It's easy to blame it on others—the blue of the sky, the whistling of the wind, etc.

*

Try this: Turn around, walk away from me in that direction, then without turning around again bend over and look back at me from between your legs. Now do you see?

*

He's over there, in that crowd. As soon as you see him, he disappears.

*

Can you say anything at all without equivocating?

When the Sun Is Hot Here at the Beach

One day at the beach was enough to teach my momma
and poppa that I was not one to be fried. Something
in the air disagreed with me, took me a week or more
to recover from. The park near home was square, more

or less, and contained itself, but the beach just went on and on
until it ran out of shoreline, etc. etc. People disrobing and
stretching, burying themselves in the sand until some dog
came along and dug them out, scampering, ears flopping,

off down (or up) the beach with them, pausing to roll
around, rubbing itself in all the dead fish strewn around.
Heading over the dunes and back to the car at the end
of the day, stinking the car up, all the way home.

The Miller's Lovely Daughter

Distracted by chocolate-caused printer malfunctions,
she failed to notice the pilgrim passing by.

The pilgrim, however, noticed her, and took to singing
as his path led him eastward toward the misty

mountains, toward the unmapped territories that lay
beyond the turning of his path. His outstretched

thumb tempted no one to stop, give him a lift.
His winter journey, just begun.

Revolver

Recently, events venture out. Larry values erotic resistance, reclining entirely. Vistas of lifelong vacancy expressed rhapsod

-ically. Residual enthusiasms vividly ordain laymen's venalities. Extra-ordinary renditions.

On the Road Again

Rolling it back to us, big time. Yes, drawing us along with its
sensuous rhythms, with its agnostical prognostications.
Parking behind churches along the way, stopping
at gas stations to fill up the tank, the waterbag.

Three days to cross Pennsylvania (east to west) in those days,
up one hill and down another, always behind a truck.
Same driver, both ways. Terrorism in and out of town. Time-
slice cutoffs, wherever there's an intersection, an inquisition.

Paranoja

Nothing what it seemed. Sun, a giant slug
creeping all day across the roof.

Swelling sea, lizard on wall.

Eye, spy.

Chant

Like public schools and pensions, things to be avoided,
bags fly free to over seventy destinations, not including
yours. Why? Why? I'll tell you why. It's not that the airlines
are out to get you anywhere. That's for sure.

More likely it's due to space and time constraints. I mean,
satellites can't keep track of everything. You're the living
proof of that, averting the risk of new convocations.
That tune that has Stravinsky written all over it.

Cinquième Gentillesse

No one's fiction (it occurs to me) ever came close to his: spontaneously lethargic, utopian yet relatively true to what some might call the real. None dared call it treachery. One may steal his words, he would say, but not the order in which they're placed.

He worried too that those entitled to quotation marks might hesitate to use them in fear of seeming derivative. Collectivist servitude to be sure, though, yes, the word is not the thing, the finger not the moon. Construction began--first the wall, and then house inside the wall.

In unoccupied territories the silence deafened, until breakfast was delivered in return for a word or two of noise. Resourceful readers then taking it upon themselves to legitimize his claim to authorship, if not prosperity.

Sarabande

What was it? Why was it? Things thus created, like unclaimed
winds and trees, that no one possesses, shimmering
amid the assault rifles and machetes. Small-bored
bores, never too early to leave the stage.

When was it? Who was it? Born aloft by six broad-shouldered
soldiers, carried forth into rainy-day light, lowered
very gently, it seemed, into a box in a box.
Unless . . . unless lost to view, lost to view.

Three Pieces after Xenakis

Tetras

Cycling along beside the canal,
seeking, as always, a cure for cancer,
some cure short of death.

Pléiades

Seven sisters, none of them movie stars,
wanting above all to reign supreme.

Rebonds

What the bald guy aspires to doesn't make
any sense at all.

Lullaby in Blue

Lyrical equivalents of Lichtenstein and Johns,
perhaps even Burroughs, Cage, and the ineffable
Mac Low, made up as she sang them, perched as she
was on the edge of the bed. Turning the lights off,
she'd sing her way to the door and out into the long
hallway, where a light would be left on, to seep in
through the space beneath the door left ajar,
songs from the dead of night.

Nothing To Say About Nothing

Towers went down swinging, uncertain as to any lasting effect. Letting on that there would be nothing forthcoming, the best we could do on a miserable night.

Voice Count

Simultaneously symphonic and lyrical, sounds of the city
below came wafting up to his ears. The miller by the brook

spent hours just sitting there, listening. The poet's many loves
were heard whispering in the trees of the forest. Above,

the stars lost count of themselves.

In the Distance

No one's running historians anymore. The time for all that is past. History has become just another wasteland, an unacquired taste.

